

Burke. “They’re a little crazy, with the war and everything, and there were some wild rumours circulating about what the labs might have been cooking up, but that wasn’t the work of some over-excited mob. It was an expert job.”

Carmichael nodded. Some of the anti-biotech groups were committed and not without expertise in matters of sabotage, but the most highly-organized also had the best intelligence, and they’d have taken the trouble to make sure that Abel’s establishment really was doing plague-war work before sending in commandos. Local people, on the other hand, were much more vulnerable to crazy talk about the war not being a real war at all, but simply a series of escapes from the government’s own labs, possibly engineered by mad eugenicists trying to slim down the econim population. All nonsense, of course – but way out here, the people had always regarded the distant federal government as a false friend and potential oppressor.

The plague war wasn’t the kind of catastrophe that enhanced nationwide social solidarity; the common enemy was too diffuse, too uncertain. Communities were drawing in upon themselves as people lost faith in Washington, in the Union. As it came to seem that the whole world was collapsing, backwoods folk became desperate to preserve the land between the horizons they could see – and many of them refused to think beyond. The survivalist ethos had taken off in a big way. These were crazy times.

Plague war wasn’t like the kind of wars people had been taught about in history; there was no army for the young men to join, no evident enemy to fight. The only responses people had to the deaths of their kids and their cousins were containment and cauterization: trying to burn out the plague germs wherever they appeared and limiting their spread. It was easy enough for some to turn their frustrated ire upon the government’s own biotech research establishments, figuring them as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It was easy, but it was dead wrong; if there was hope for the future, Carmichael thought, it was contained in the labs that were working flat out to find effective defences for use against viral and bacteriological terrorism.

“On the other hand,” Burke said, “the townspeople never wanted the lab here. A lot of people thought it was forced on them. Nobody ever took the trouble to tell them that the people there weren’t engineering viral weapons. Nobody told them much of *anything*, except maybe to mind their own business while the world went to hell.”

“People like Abel and Franklin are trying to save the world,” said Carmichael. “Whether genetic engineers are somehow to blame for the war or not, we’re the only people who can possibly rescue the human race from its effects. The men that torched that establishment aren’t just treasonous, they’re insane.”

Sergeant Andrews was looking the other away, pointedly ignoring the conversation – but he was listening. Carmichael knew that Andrews was neither treasonous nor insane, but he also knew that the sergeant didn’t feel any particular loyalty to the men who’d made the weapons of the ongoing war. He was a soldier; he’d been trained to fight enemy soldiers

from armoured positions, firing good honest bullets. Being shoved into the front line of this kind of conflict must have seemed to him a kind of betrayal.

The streets of the town were almost as deserted as the road from the burnt-out lab-complex. Half the houses were empty, already falling derelict. The people who remained stayed indoors as much as possible, fearing that every breath of wind might be contaminated. Even so, life went on. The shops had little enough in the way of goods, but they were open for business and gossip.

Burke guided them to a hotel in the centre of town which still had a full staff, and they booked in. The sergeant sent two of his men out on a foraging expedition to buy in supplies.

“I need to speak to someone who worked at the labs,” Carmichael told Burke. “If you could find me someone who can tell me what was going on in the weeks before the attack, I’d be grateful. I need to get a better idea of the stage the experiments were at. Abel was a little behind with his reports, thanks to the war and being so short-staffed.”

“I’ll ask,” said Burke, “but it might not be easy. The survivors aren’t exactly in hiding, but some of them became very shy about what they did long before the fire. You know how it is, with the rumours and all.”

Carmichael knew how it was. Even cleaners and gate-guards who worked in biotech installations had become shy since the war began – and their reluctance to talk to strangers would amplify that all-round reticence. Everybody in Ashton would have been happier if he and his guardian angels had not come.

“Do what you can,” he said with a sigh. “The quicker I can find something substantial to put in my report, the quicker I can get away.”

After he’d eaten supper with Andrews and the men Carmichael took a flask of boiled water up to his room. He’d managed to locate a working TV set but the official broadcasts were all routine and both the ents channels were reeling out ancient tapes he’d seen way back when. It didn’t take long to write up the day’s notes, and when he’d finished he loaded a chip into his bookplate and settled down to read. He was just getting absorbed when somebody tapped on the pane of the curtained window.

He was on the third floor, but he realized that someone must have climbed up the fire escape. He went to the window and opened it. It was raining outside and the woman who was waiting was pretty wet. She was in her mid-20s, with short-cropped brown hair and steel-rimmed glasses. When he let her in she took time out to clean the raindrops off the lenses.

“Dr Carmichael?” she said. “I heard – indirectly – that there were army personnel asking around for anyone who might know what had happened up at the labs. Your name was mentioned.” She slipped off her wet coat and draped it over the back of the room’s only armchair.

“What’s wrong with the door?” he asked, thinking: *I misjudged you, Dr Burke – I didn’t expect results this fast, if at all.*

“I’d rather keep this between the two of us. There’s some bad feeling about the labs and what happened up there, and I wouldn’t want people to think I’d come here to finger anyone.”

and the Boy fell silent. “He has explained it all to me,” he said. “I took the time to listen, you see, the time to decipher his speech, where you, his father, are too impatient.”

Ruig wanted to respond, to defend himself, but he was wearing the cloak and its authority forced silence on him.

“You have him cast from your own tissues – your own child – and you have him transformed into the vehicle for your dreams of domination: you make him your hawk, so when you travel alone you have a toy to fly, to work, to use. To foster his obedience you addict him to the substances on your lure: drugs suffice where trust and love fail.

“When you were the age of your son you had been independent for most of a year, yet he is chained to you more surely than if he had been grafted onto your chest.”

In that instant, Ruig could see Boy soaring away from him on a thermal and again he knew that feeling of awe, of envy at the boy-hawk’s freedom. And he knew that he had been deceiving himself. “And so,” Ruig said to his son, as the other appeared to have run out of words for now. “And so you go to a Caster and have a new Ruig cast from your own tissues, as I had you cast from mine.” He saw the look on Boy’s face and knew that he was right. “And you use him to undermine me and, you hope, to replace me.” Boy met his look, with a challenging glare of his own. “Would you have killed me, if you could?” he asked.

He reached for the ties of his cloak, and as he moved he saw Boy and the other Ruig flinch as if they feared some form of retaliation. He smiled at that, aware now

of how easy it is not to know your own father, or your own son. He was not a violent man.

He placed the neatly folded garment on the mattress, and then put the cap by its side.

And then he reached down and pulled his shirt from his trousers, held it under his chin so that his hands were free to manipulate the slit in his belly.

It had been a long time, but eventually the small cylinder emerged from its resting place. He looked up and saw that Boy and his Ruig were surprised, confused. “My Ward,” he said, holding the cylinder out to them. “You wish to replace me, then do so. The Witness’s outfit will need some alteration...”

When the other Ruig took the Ward from his hand he suddenly felt different. His protection was gone, and it was probably that knowledge as much as the physical reality of it that made him feel changed.

He watched as the other Ruig pressed the Ward to Boy’s abdomen and it slowly sank through the skin.

When it was finished Ruig nodded at the two. “I hope he treats you as I should have treated him,” he told the other Ruig. “I wish you both luck.”

“What will you do?” asked the impostor.

Ruig shrugged and smiled. “I’ll take my chances,” he said. “Just like anyone else.” And, he thought, I might just learn to fly.

Keith Brooke’s recently finished fourth novel, possibly to be marketed as “mainstream” fiction by Victor Gollancz Ltd, is provisionally called *Scar Tissue*. His last story here was “Jurassic and the Great Tree”

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